

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE DC 9

WASHINGTON POST
5 January 1984

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Congress Misled On Superiority Of Soviet Sub

In their insatiable hunger for fancy hardware and ever bigger budgets, the Pentagon's people are not above juggling the facts and figures when they testify behind closed doors on Capitol Hill.

A favorite tactic is to give key members of Congress secret, selective intelligence on new Soviet weapons, intended to scare the lawmakers into signing a blank check for matching U.S. weapons. The weapons "gaps" thus revealed can only be bridged by the expenditure of billions of dollars.

It's an axiom of this technique that Congress should rarely be told anything that makes the Soviets seem less than 10 feet tall. Reversing the words of an old song, the Pentagon fund-seekers accentuate the negative and eliminate the positive.

My associates Dale Van Atta and Donald Goldberg have uncovered a classic example of this misleading Pentagon practice, involving the Soviets' new Alfa-class attack submarine.

From secret documents and intelligence sources, it appears that the

Alfa is a most formidable sub. But without actually lying—simply by not telling the whole truth—the admirals have greatly inflated the Alfa's actual danger.

For example:

- The Alfa is the fastest submarine ever made, with a maximum speed of 42 knots on the surface and 45 knots underwater. It can outrun not only the fastest U.S. subs, but the Navy's surface ships as well. The Pentagon doom merchants cite an ultra-secret intelligence report that tells how an Alfa sub showed off doing figure-eights behind a Navy battle group.

But what the Pentagon experts conveniently play down is the fact that, while our fastest subs are as quiet as sharks, the Soviet Alfa is one of the noisiest vessels ever to churn the ocean. It's the underwater equivalent of a hot rod without a muffler. In fact, the Alfa can be detected acoustically more than 1,000 miles away, which means it could hardly sneak up on an enemy target.

Furthermore, at any speed over 20 knots, the Alfa's engine noise would drown out the target's noise. Submerged subs are blind; a submerged Alfa is also deaf at high speed.

And though it could outrun U.S. attack vessels, it couldn't escape the Navy's anti-submarine planes and helicopters.

- The Alfa can dive to 3,200 feet,

compared with the Los Angeles-class subs' maximum depth of less than 2,000 feet.

But the reason for running deep is to avoid detection, and here again the Alfa's hot-rod noise betrays it.

In addition, the Alfa can't go as far or stay out of port as long as U.S. subs can.

- The Alfa's lighter, stronger titanium-alloy hull is what enables it to go faster and dive deeper. The Soviets were first to develop the technology of welding titanium hulls, reportedly at the cost of several workers' lives. Besides being lighter and stronger than steel, titanium is also non-magnetic, which means the Alfa is virtually invisible to magnetic detection devices.

But it can still be easily picked up by acoustical detectors.

- Though selected members of Congress are told in ominous, whispered detail of the Alfa's success, they are not told that the sub was a colossal flop when the first one was launched in 1969. After sea trials in 1971, the first Alfa was scrapped. It wasn't until 1978 that the supposed super-sub achieved operational capability. And technical difficulties still plague it.

Footnote: Significantly, for all their purported alarm over the Alfa submarine, the admirals have never suggested that the United States build one like it.